Attracting lightning like a lightning rod: *Exposure* by Antony Gormley

Christophe Van Gerrewey

'The landscape disturbs my thought,' he said in a low voice. 'It makes my reflections sway like suspension bridges in a furious current.'
- Franz Kafka[1]

Yet another work of art graces the public space of the Netherlands – but maybe *Exposure* by Antony Gormley is different to the rest? Its location certainly is a quintessential example of what we have come to understand as Dutch space: manmade, surrounded by water, flat, open, and with a horizon showing not even a hint of a wrinkle anywhere. *Exposure* stands in a place that did not exist fifty years ago, a place that was unreachable then, at the bottom of the Zuiderzee, the former large sea inlet of the Netherlands. It stands at the end of a dam that stretches into the water, parallel to the coast of Lelystad, the capital of the newest province of the Netherlands: Flevoland.

This province came into being in the middle of the twentieth century, as a result of a special form of territorial expansion: not war, annexation, trade or barter, but by the *creation* of the very ground, by reclaiming the land from the water. People have only been living in Lelystad since the late 1960s. In 1980 the settlement became a proper community and currently numbers 75,000 inhabitants.

It is no coincidence that in a country where so much public space is created and designed by man, the events which are to take place in this said space are handled with similar efficiency, foresight and care. It is an unspoken tradition in the Netherlands to impose art on 'new' public space, like a *deus ex machina* being pushed onto the stage from the wings: the most important decisions have been made, the work of architects and designers is done (or has been exchanged from the start with that of civil servants and administrators), but the preliminary, still unpopulated and untouched end result turns out to be lacking in 'life,' 'humanity' or even just predictability. Art is then used to introduce a forcefully positive statement and often to resolve, or rather obscure, all conflicts between the involved parties. The story must be finished, everyone must live happily ever after, and a certain uninteresting tedium is allowed to enter, in such a way that public opinion may go home without any feelings of guilt, in the certainty that the show is over.

Antony Gormley's *Exposure* is by no means the first piece of art to be erected at the behest of the government on the reclaimed ground of the Dutch Zuiderzee. Artists such as Robert Morris, Richard Serra and Daniel Libeskind have preceded him. Lelystad, and by extension the entire province of Flevoland, will not leave the

[1] Franz Kafka, 'Diversions or Proof that It's Impossible to Live,' *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971 [1988]), pp. 25-26.

Netherlands alone, and the Netherlands returns the favour. There is something about these new cities and lands, these completely human but seemingly divine creations of land, that is begging for attention and meaning. Without much effort we can even view it as an emblem of Dutch society – even of the modernity of Western life in general. One has to take a stand regarding to what extent human life on earth can be known and controlled. The suspicion arises that things only get worse when plans and prospects are developed. The question, to paraphrase a famous Dutch writer, W. F. Hermans, is whether we are governing the course of our lives, or whether life is following its course independently.[2] Hermans, incidentally, would be wryly pleased to see how the polder model – the metonymic expression for the political belief, typical to the Netherlands, that society is makeable – has lost its credibility. The polder model may be nothing more than politics with interventionist tendencies; politics that believe in the principle that rules, plans, expansions and projects will make life better. For example, for years there were plans to also drain the Markermeer, on whose shores *Exposure* stands; it was to be another new part of Flevoland and the Netherlands. The plans were finally scrapped in the early 1990s, together with many other optimistic projections and concepts that were intended to make the Netherlands into a guiding country for the international community.

Many feel the kingdom of the Netherlands must at all costs regain this old role. Others, however, find that the Netherlands is still excessive in its planning, predicting, regulating and mollycoddling. The conflict is crystallising around Lelystad and its environs – and by analogy it concerns all of us. Fifty years on, there is no consensus on how to evaluate the Zuiderzee works and the new cities, and even less is there any clear idea on how to progress further. Opinions are quite astoundingly divided. In 1999 a photography book, entitled *Magical Flevoland* [*Magisch Flevoland*], was commissioned by the province.[3] The writer, H. J. A. Hofland (1927), one of the most independent minds of the Netherlands, revealed himself in the book's text as a passionate defender of the new lands of the Netherlands situated by the Markermeer and the IJsselmeer. In his opinion it was unforgivable that the work there had been brought to a halt. 'In 1999,' he writes, 'one quarter of the youngest province is still covered in water, not because of some natural disaster, but, because apparently a majority has ruled so. I feel it is a grotesque denial of that which is a natural requirement of the Dutch people: space. To forgo the creation of such space, to not carry out this great plan to fulfil the country's needs is a national disgrace the scope of which will only become visible over the course of the next generations.'[4]

Hofland continues to write with such intense positivity, also in his assessment of the existing situation, that it sounds quite forced. In any case he does not believe the negative stories about the area that are doing the rounds. 'There we were, in East Flevoland, on the road by the dike with the dozens of wind turbines, stubbornly and calmly generating their clean electricity. Stench? Noise? Cheap demagoguery!' He

---

[2] W. F. Hermans, *Herinneringen van een engelbewaarder* (De Bezige Bij: Amsterdam, 1971).
[3] H. J. A. Hofland & Ger Dekkers, *Magisch Flevoland* [*Magical Lelystad*] (Zwolle: Waanders, 1999).
[4] Hofland, *Magisch Flevoland*, p. 21.

even without restraint advises the reader to go and visit: 'The best course to take is, as always, not to listen to the judgements and prejudices of others, but to go look for yourself. Pretend you are going abroad, read up on it in advance, pick a new and an older city guide from the cornucopia of literature on the subject. Then plan a few walks for yourself. Don't go when the weather is bad because even Rome or Manhattan look dismal in those circumstances if you don't live there.'[5]

A completely different voice can be found in a book by Joris Van Casteren, whose parents moved to Lelystad in his birth year, 1976. In 2008 he published *Lelystad*, a mixture of autobiography, human interest and highly personal historiography.[6] Van Casteren would never compare Lelystad to Rome or Manhattan – except for maybe the dark and dangerous neighbourhoods of the Bronx. The newly built city where he grew up was in no way cheerful, dignified or exemplary. In this book, Lelystad is portrayed as the human refuse heap of the Netherlands: a place for neurotics, poor people, drug addicts and the unemployed; a place ruled by criminality, vandalism and fear; and a place where experimental and unsophisticated forms of religion, education and recreation led to surrealistic tableaus. And like mud, Lelystad sucks onto the feet of its inhabitants: Van Casteren was lucky enough to get out, but a childhood friend of his, despite obtaining a degree in philosophy, is currently back in Lelystad, working at McDonalds. Other acquaintances and friends are retarded, depressed or dead (suicide, overdose and murder). In interviews, Van Casteren has emphasised that he still views Lelystad as 'his' city, although he does not live there anymore, and that he loves his city.[7] Anyone who has read *Lelystad* can only assume that is a bitter kind of love, a love for the dark side, for failure and marginalised life. It is in no way the kind of love that can be used as an argument for embarking on a social project.

No one knows what we, and the Netherlands, should do with Lelystad. At the northern tip of this city, Flevoland ends in much the same way that mankind in the times before Columbus used to imagine the world ended, when they believed the world was as flat as a pancake. This is where Antony Gormley has placed a 'statue,' which he named *Exposure*. It is simply impossible to disregard the surroundings of the sculpture. *Exposure* cannot be viewed without thinking about Lelystad, the Markermeer, the Zuiderzee, the Netherlands and the rest of the world. As in all of Gormley's other works, the viewer is challenged and engaged by the work, not least because the sculptures always, in varying degrees, refer to the human scale. The effect, the function and meaning of the work become apparent through the interplay between artwork, viewer and environment. The work of art has discarded much of its artistic and formal aura here, whether you like it or not. This piece of art is not able to shine like this wherever it stands; or, to be more precise, it would shine differently in each place.

---

[5] Hofland, *Magisch Flevoland*, p. 23.
[6] Joris Van Casteren, *Lelystad* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2008).
[7] See, for example: Joris van Casteren, 'Ik hou van Lelystad, mijn stad,' *de Stentor*, 28 September 2008: http://www.destentor.nl/regio/flevoland/lelystad/3778839/Joris-van-Casteren-Ik-hou-van-Lelystad-mijn-stad.ece

In ‘Art and Objecthood,’ a famous and often cited text from 1967 that has been used in reference to Gormley’s work, the American art critic Michael Fried attacks minimalist art because it requires too much from the viewer and therefore detracts from the autonomy of the artwork.[8] That kind of art, says Fried, wants to make the viewer as aware as possible of the fact that he or she is looking at art. This type of exhibition of the object, in his opinion, leads to nothing other than an argument for a new genre of artistic theatre. A theatricality arises on the foundations of the actual and concrete situation in which the viewer is viewing the work. Gormley, and many other artists and theoreticians, would not disagree, were it not that Fried sees such theatricalisation of the art as a negative thing that ultimately only damages the reputation of art. Nonetheless, it is precisely this theatricalisation – described so accurately by Fried – that can save art in public spaces from utter senselessness and utilitarian positivism. Only if art succeeds in activating the theatre of the public space and intensifying it, precisely by confronting art and viewer with one another, in the setting of the site and the open air, can it justify its existence. Nothing is explained or resolved in this case. The impossibility of judging Lelystad is not lifted. The city council does not gain a simplistic poster child or stationary set but an eloquent evangelist. Nor is there any touting of a pessimistic or spectacular apocalypse of hellish state, as if the artwork is a button to close the last door. *Exposure* is indeed different from its surroundings, precisely because it knows how to make its surroundings other.

The way in which Gormley succeeds in achieving this with *Exposure* is, paradoxically, completely dependent on the precise and formal properties of the object and of the artwork itself. *Exposure* consists of 2000 steel elements that are held together by 550 nodes. The construction is over 25 metres high and weighs around about 60 tonnes. From very close up *Exposure* gives a fair impression of a chopped up but brilliant wreck of dozens of pylons – an infrastructure phenomenon which by no coincidence is often the only thing to be seen in the open landscape around Lelystad. Only from a distance – for example, from the beginning of the dam or from across the water, from the shores of Lelystad – does the shape of *Exposure* become clear. The 2000 steel elements are constructed precisely so as to allow the form of a crouching man to appear – although the silhouette is never massive but always transparent and ephemeral, and the landscape and surroundings always remain visible through the web of steel, from every point. *Exposure* resembles a hologram that with the use of familiar elements – the steel members of an above ground electricity network – calls into existence an image that can either be seen or not seen, depending on the position of the viewer. Moreover, no two steel members are equal in length, increasing the somewhat chaotic impression of the work. The technology of the object (realising this artwork required considerable engineering ingenuity) has been applied here to ultimately arrive back at the objective that, in good humanist tradition, should be the goal of every technological application: the human body. In interviews and lectures Gormley has often reiterated that modernist art pursues its own formal autonomy to

[8] Michael Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood’ in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University Press, 1998).

such an extent that the human being and human observation are usually squashed out of existence. 'Modernism,' he says 'the engine of the past century's art, could be seen as having excluded the body. It was a time in which art emancipated itself from the duties of representation, of illustrating the grand narratives, of being a functional instrument in the social world. It withdrew into its own realm, meditating on its own internal conditions, emancipating itself, and in the process the artist, who became a paradigm of the free individual able to give his or her life value through making work. It is time to look again at the body.'[9] The criticism from authors such as Michael Fried that theatrical art engages the viewer all too much in the work is now turned upside down. Art is turning its back on its own silent aura and its autonomous abstraction and being brought back to humankind in a very literal and monumental way. The artist is no longer trying to prove something on personal grounds, but aims to place the burden of proof on the observer. The work speaks; it is a spokesperson for everything that is found in its vicinity.

In the previously cited book *Lelystad*, Joris Van Casteren recounts how in his late teens he discovered the existence of metaphor after reading the poetry of the *Vijftigers* (a radical poetry movement in the Netherlands in the 1950s). The town he had grown up in had in no way prepared him for this discovery: 'In Lelystad things were exactly what they purported to be. A letterbox was a letterbox, a parking space was a parking space. Trees did not resemble gnarly figures, they grew up straight, where they were planted. Nothing was reminiscent of anything else, only of itself. Lelystad was an inoculation against imagination. In Lelystad there was no symbolism. Nowhere did you see an ornamental edifice, an Ionic column or a baroque tympani. There were no buildings or objects that represented anything. Nothing referred to the battle waged against the water. Lelystad was made by practical people who wanted to leave nothing to coincidence. Any possible move towards chaos was thwarted from the word go. In Lelystad there were no unexpected shapes that could evoke any associations. The only aspect the agrarian engineers of the state service had not been able to control were the hallucinatory cloud formations blowing over the city at top speed.'[10]

If art has anything to bring to the human in the public space, it is precisely that: uncertainty, pluriformity and lack of resolution. The realisation that the things people encounter and are surrounded by cannot and should not be solely functional is given material weight that cannot be ignored by anyone. *Exposure* does not symbolise an abstract concept; it should not be approached as a code to be cracked by the artist himself, the critic, the sponsor or the population. Quite the contrary, it attracts associations and meanings freely and without censure. It attracts lightning like a lightning rod, as Roland Barthes once wrote about the 'empty sign' of the Eiffel tower.[11] The firmament in which the lightning bolts shoot back and forth has been given specific colour, weight and boundaries by the interplay between environment,

[9] Antony Gormley, 'Body, Space, Time' in Corinne Saunders, Ulrika Maude, Jana Macnaughton (eds.), *The body and the Arts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 209.
[10] Van Casteren, *Lelystad*, pp. 183-184.
[11] Roland Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes. Tome II* (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2002), p. 534.

artwork and viewer. The game of association and the search for meaning, equally unquenchable as it is unpredictable, is again given literal representation in the domain of language by naming the work *Exposure*. The multiple and ambiguous meanings of the title refer again to the conceptual character of Gormley's art: the ideas of the artist and the spiritual and physical movements caused in the viewer by these ideas demand their rights – more so than form, aesthetics, craft or beauty.

'Exposure' is a term from photography, referring to camera film being exposed to the light, and to the time frame of this exposure. The image of this man is also influenced by the way it is lit. In the day it reflects sunlight and practically becomes an independent light source; as evening falls it condenses the dark blue sky to a coherent mass of spots. The word 'exposure' can also refer to how a building is situated: we can speak of a house having 'northern exposure': being oriented towards the north. *Exposure* is oriented towards the Markermeer; the immense body of water that was on the verge of being drained, through its system of dikes, to reclaim another polder. The crouching man stares out over the water as if surprised that it is still there, that the spirits and their projects have changed to such an extent that the water will never offer a different view. 'Exposure' has yet another meaning: to be laid bare, to be exposed, exhibited, anthropologically: the naked human being exposed to the natural elements, which of course are not so natural anymore. Actually it is indeed humans, the inhabitants of Flevoland, who have been taken out of their natural element and transplanted into a new climate, a new environment – for better or for worse, unprotected but also unhindered by history or any material obstructions. Here, the sky is the limit, with all that entails. The most recent meaning of 'exposure' comes, not surprisingly, from the media. And it is this definition of 'exposure' which has now officially entered the Dutch language, as recorded in the Van Dale Dutch dictionary: 'Exposure: attention from the media for a product, service, show, etc.' And of course, *Exposure* provides precisely that, involuntarily and unavoidably: as a landmark for Flevoland and a beacon to the surrounding area, it attracts positive public attention to this controversial piece of land – and to British artist Antony Gormley, all the parties concerned and the sponsors. *Exposure* helps lend distinction in the vast market of destinations, art products and images. As in a crazy thunderstorm, these meanings flash back and forth, between artwork and surroundings, in the view of the observer, in the firmament above land and water.

And so the landscape of Flevoland has been literally and figuratively altered. It is easy to forget that the history of the Dutch landscape has always been full of people. Only recently, since the twentieth century, has emptiness become a theme in landscape representations – and not only within Dutch borders either. Another essay by Roland Barthes, 'The World as Object' ['Le monde-objet'], about early Dutch modern art, emphasises this too: 'It seems it is the fate of Dutch landscapes to be black with people, to go from the infinite number of elements into the fullness of the human register. That canal, that mill, those trees, those birds, are all connected by a ferry loaded with people; the slow boat, heavy with its freight, connects the two banks and concludes the movement of the trees and water with the intention of the human motive, which reduces forces of nature to the rank of objects and turns creation into

something utilitarian.'[12] This is the paradox of Dutch landscape evolution: only once the landscape was manipulated and simulated in extreme ways did it gain and take some distance, by as it were hitting back with its own emptiness. *Exposure* does not colour the space between heaven and earth black with people, but still makes the human presence quite inescapable in its own subtle and 'transparent' way.

At the same time the presence remains precarious and sensitive. *Exposure* after all is the representation of a crouching man who sits with bowed knees so that his buttocks are resting on his heels without touching the ground. He who 'sits at ground level' is adjusting to a child's level; a simple level. In this way *Exposure* – a technological artefact – seems to be trying to get closer to earth and its inhabitants, but as a giant of 25 metres high, it is doomed to remain remote, great and also unseen. The sculpture will never be fully known or embraced, in the same way that it keeps the relations between viewer and surroundings in motion before they devolve.

Crouching is also an in-between form of sitting and standing; it means one is still undecided about staying or going. A crouching man is testing how steady the ground is under his feet. Maybe he wants to grab a handful of soil, sample it, study it; maybe the fatigue will become too much and he will have to lie down on the path; maybe he will stand up and continue down the path, a path no one knew existed. On the edge of Flevoland, with a view of the Zuiderzee (or what remains of it), and with the houses, buildings and public spaces of Lelystad behind its back, under the same clouds that drift over this curious and unfinished project of the Netherlands, the indecisiveness of this man – with the viewer acting as his proxy – soon becomes the indecisiveness of the world.

[12] Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes. Tome II*, p.284.